



Maybe Tomorrow by TheRealSokka

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Summary: One (very) late campaign night, Will starts to think that something positive could happen tomorrow.

Maybe Tomorrow

Have a happy 2019, everyone! :)

Maybe Tomorrow

There is a small river winding through the valley, and a group of travellers has camped by its bank.

They are sitting around the campfire, their weapons propped up in the soft ground: bow and dagger; sword and staff. The red ruby in the paladin's sword reflects the fire light. They're resting. Now the storyteller looks up, eyes thoughtful. He starts to speak: "The road branches off into two paths, while a lonely mountain looms ahead. Distant, winged figures are circling the peak, shrouded in mist. They're bloodcurdling shrieks can be heard even from this distance."

"Jesus, it's harpies, isn't it?!" exclaims the ranger.

"Shit. They'll see us for sure, no matter where we go. This is bad." says the bard, fiddling with his sheet of paper.

"What do we do?" the cleric wants to know.

The storyteller leans forward. Seen by light, he is little older than thirteen; a boy with deep brown eyes and messy hair. The light isn't from a campfire, but from electric light bulbs, and suddenly the surroundings look a lot like a messy basement instead of a river valley. Not to the party of travellers around the table, though. They are still in that place that the words have conjured up.

It's Saturday; campaign day. No one knows for how long they've been playing and no one particularly cares, either. Will certainly doesn't. He doesn't know about Lucas, who's eyebrows are drawn together in determination, or Dustin, who hasn't stopped drumming his fingers on the table for the past five minutes, but personally the youngest Byers boy didn't really have time to care: Their dungeon master's latest scenario, in addition to being as immersive as ever, packs a real

punch; filled to the brim with new monsters and unexpected hazards, and he has had to really concentrate to keep everyone alive.

The dungeon master himself sits at the head of the table. Mike has long ago given up his dignified storyteller-pose to lean in, obviously as engrossed as they are. His hair is falling into his eyes, and Will wonders not for the first time how he can even see everything that's going on.

"We shouldn't go up there." Lucas speaks up pre-emptively, before anyone can even suggest it. "That's a bad idea."

"We have to, though." Will disagrees. "They'll have nest. We need their hoard."

"Yeah, or we won't make it far." Dustin says. "So we go in. But very, very carefully!"

There's this constant tension that any new move could lead them into an unsurvivable situation and become their last, and they all have invested too much in this adventure already. So maybe Will shouldn't be feeling this light and elated while Mike is painting their situation grimmer and grimmer.

But the truth is, after the harrowing week that lies behind him, even this stressful survival trip feels nice; it lifts some of the tension, even. Mostly that tension comes from school. Troy and James haven't left them alone once again, and lately Will feels like they are picking on him specifically more and more. Calling slurs more often than usual and with more fervour; shoving him into lockers; stealing his lunch; things like that.

Maybe he has looked at Mike wrong once and they have noticed.

Compared to that, spending the evening with Mike, Lucas and Dustin is heaven. *I'm really lucky*, the thought steals into Will's head. They really are like the adventuring party they play as: kind, helpful, a little dysfunctional at times, but they hold together – even if you wouldn't necessarily think so at first if you saw Lucas and Dustin's regular bickering. They are doing it right now, arguing over whether going up against the harpies' nest is a smart move or a sure-fire way

to get them all killed. And then there's Mike, who meanwhile is trying valiantly not to grin at the slightly less polite way the two are phrasing those arguments.

This feels good. It feels natural.

Which is something that worries Will a lot, since the giddy fluttering in his stomach, when Mike finally does give in and the grin spreads over his face, definitely shouldn't feel natural.

Will can't say for certain when this started happening; when his thoughts about his best friend went beyond best-friend territory, or when they turned into this feeling that he still refuses to give a name. He really doesn't know. *It* gradually crept up on him without warning. *It* just kept growing, like the little weeds in the garden that you never notice until it's too late, and just like those *it* has resisted every one of Will's efforts to get rid of it again.

He *can* say with absolute certainty when he became aware of it. Yes, that's easy: Movie night at Mike's, three months ago, just the two of them. They'd watched trashy horror films till way beyond their bedtime, until Will was leaning against Mike, head nestled into his shoulder, and suddenly found himself enjoying that far too much. *Wanting-to-kiss your-best-friend* enjoying it too much.

Will turns away to hide his blush at the memory. He'll never forget that sequence of emotions: contentment, then confusion, followed by absolute panic. Luckily, Mike has never inquired why he suddenly bolted off the couch, completely red-faced. He accepted Will's hurried, stuttered apology that he had to go to the bathroom; evidently oblivious to the chaos of emotions that just erupted right beside him. He trusted his friend's word. Why wouldn't he, right?

So, after a solid five minutes of staring at the bathroom mirror looking in panic for a visible trace of those strange feelings, and ten more of trying in vain to figure out how to get rid of them again, Will slunk back onto the couch and prayed to God that Mike somehow wouldn't notice.

He hasn't, and somehow that's only made *it* worse.

"We reach the base of the mountain." That's Mike, in full storyteller mode. "A hollow yawns in its side, and bones jut out of the earth like rotten teeth. An awful stench wafts out. But in the darkness inside, something glimmers silver."

"Troll. Definitely." Dustin says immediately.

"Could be; could be just a bear cave." Mike suggests innocently.

"With our luck? Nope. And besides; how many bears do you know that collect treasures?"

"The treasure doesn't limit it to just troll, though." Lucas disagrees. "Could be anything from unlucky wanderers to a goblins' den. Still, it's safer than that stupid harpies' nest. I'll scout ahead, see what I can see."

"I'll give you an obscuring shroud." Will offers. "Just in case. So whatever's in there doesn't see you."

Lucas gives him a thumbs up: "Good plan."

That's perhaps the weirdest thing: that evening, on the couch, Will had felt like the world had ended; like he didn't belong there anymore; like a portal would have to open up and swallow him whole. He still kind of expects it. But right now, he is playing this campaign with his friends, with Mike, just like they always do; and he's enjoying it. Outwardly, nothing in the Party has changed. They still complain about school, get pushed around and sleep over at the Wheeler's every weekend. Dustin is still the same; Lucas is; Mike is. And yes; Will is, too, kind of. At least he doesn't suddenly feel out of place. Even that beyond-friendly warmth in his chest doesn't feel out of place, even though it should, and that confuses him so much.

Mike nods. One of his hair strands is falling over his eyes again. "Ok then. Lucas, roll on your sneak skill; Will, on your illusion skill. We'll be ready to jump in and cover you if something goes wrong."

"Which it will. Inevitably." Dustin adds. He's had a pessimistic streak lately. Or maybe he's just being realistic, given the nature of this campaign.

Will obligingly throws the dice and watches it bounce. It has the added benefit that it gives both his hands and his eyes something to do, so he won't have to stare at that hair strand or suppress the impulse to brush it away. He's done that a hundred times before, but now it would feel *beyond-friendly*.

Of course, something goes wrong. Of course it's a troll cave, and of course Lucas rolls such a pitifully low number that no amount of obscuring spell can stop him from tripping and loudly banging against the first silver cauldron he sees, and of course the troll who in turn comes charging at them is a mean, five foot tall trolless with an ill-fitting dowry dress and a meat cleaver.

Ok, maybe not 'of course' for that last one. That is so damn weird that only Mike Wheeler could have come up with it.

It turns out that luck isn't on their side today. Every single party member performs so terribly in the first round that they take a serious beating from the troll. Maybe she's angry that they've interrupted her wedding preparations or something. At this point, everyone is panicking a bit, which means that everyone is hunched over the table staring at the board like their lives depend on it, which they do. Their foreheads almost brush; Dustin is drumming nervously on the table; Mike is gnawing at his lower lip; and Will notices too late that he's been staring. He leans back before anyone notices and valiantly looks at the board, instead.

He's not used to questioning everything he does around his best friend and he keeps forgetting, especially when Mike gets this super-concentrated look that only campaigns or new X-Men issues bring out. The one where his brows scrunch up and his eyes are fixed on one point and you could set off an explosion next to him and he wouldn't notice. Sometimes that look combines with a cute, absent little smile, too.

Will wants that look directed at him so badly.

He's not stupid; he knows this is not how boys are supposed to feel for other boys. It's wrong; it's disgusting. He's ashamed of it, too. But probably not nearly enough as he should be. Not when Mike is always around him somewhere, thinking and planning and being

Mike. It's just not fair.

But then they beat the troll, and Mike almost jumps out of his chair high-fiving everyone, and that warm, giddy happiness that's spreading through Will's chest can't possibly be a bad thing, right? It feels like *more* – perhaps more than it should be, but in that moment Will can't bring himself to care, or pretend he doesn't want it.

Mike's smile lingers on him for a short moment. Will smiles back and it's easy; he doesn't even blush. It really doesn't feel wrong. It feels like it always has; maybe just a bit better. And it makes his head dance with all kinds of *maybe's*.

Maybe afterwards, when they say goodbye, he could slip in a little long hug and try to make that say everything that he can't say. Just once.

Maybe tomorrow he won't shrink when Troy and James come for them. He'll stand up and stop them before they can call his friend an ugly frogface. He has no idea how they see that in Mike, but they're so wrong and he'll tell them. Just once.

Maybe tomorrow he could show Mike one of the drawings he's made of him. He wouldn't have to tell him why. Maybe Mike would even hang it up in his room.

Maybe tomorrow he'll have the courage to ask his best friend out to the cinema; Friday the 13th is supposed to be good; they could watch that. Just the two of them. It wouldn't have to be a date; not for Mike; he'd never have to know; but just once...

"Will! Hello; earth to Byers!"

He jerks back to the present, meeting Lucas' expecting eyes. "Huh? What?"

Their ranger rolls his eyes, in that annoyed-amused way that only Lucas can do: "Will the Wise, get your head in the game. We're in a bit of a pickle here. We need a nice, high roll for a healing spell, quickly."

Will Byers obligingly gets his head back in the game. Will the Wise manages to mend just enough of the party's damage – sustained from

a horde of immortal skeletons that dropped from the ceiling, apparently – for all of the party members to make it out of the caves in one piece. Lucas has managed to snatch up the map they were in there for and he's not too worse for wear, and Mike' is already hovering over said map, making plans how they should proceed. Considering the circumstances, Will thinks it could have gone much worse. Not that you would know that from listening to Dustin, who for the next half hour doesn't stop complaining that most of his equipment has been lost in the encounter.

The campaign goes on and on. Will moves, rolls, casts his spells and sneaks in glances; until he looks up at the clock and it says that almost ten hours have passed. He doesn't believe the thing at first, until he looks to the window. It's long grown dark outside; the day is getting late.

Mom won't like it if I drive home late, is Will's first thought, closely followed by: *We could have a sleepover!* A quiet smile steals onto his lips. One more night in this basement before he has to face school again. He'd like that.

Maybe tomorrow could be a good day.

The others, meanwhile, either haven't noticed the time or don't care as well. "This just keeps getting better and better." Dustin is saying.

The rest of the table agrees glumly.

They have just learned that an evil warlock is responsible for the monsters that they've had to fight up to this point. He has been terrorising the land; murdering and taking anything he wanted. Of course, they Party can't allow that.

"Right; the wizard is holed up in his tower." Mike says. "There's two ways to get there: One leads through the foothills that we're in right now, and then up over a mountain pass. The other goes through the caves; the ones where we encountered the troll."

"Yeah, and every other nasty thing under the sun." Lucas states dryly. "It can't ever be easy, right?"

Mike's eyes shine in the light. For just a second he jumps out of character: "Easy is boring. I knew we could handle it. So; what do you say; the mines or the mountains?" He is looking at them expectantly.

"Caves don't like me today." Dustin says immediately, looking disgruntled. Apparently he's still a little sore about that skeleton incident. "I vote mountains."

There's a moment of contemplation as the rest of the Party weighs their options. Dustin's path does seem like the sensible choice: The foothills up to this point have housed little more than a few goblins, and as of yet there's nothing to suggest that the mountain pass would spell trouble.

It's Dustin himself who points that out first: "...but then that seems almost too easy. All that trouble, and now it's suddenly supposed to be smooth sailing?"

That has been bugging Will, too. "Yeah. That warlock has to know we're here by now. So why didn't the monsters try harder to stop us from reaching the easy path to his tower?" he questions. "It does seem too easy. Don't you think?"

They look at Lucas, who slowly nods: "The caves are full of monsters; the mountains aren't. Which means that he wants us to take the mountains. Which means that it's a trap."

"Yeah; probably like what Saruman did to the Fellowship."

"Holy crap, you're right! Exactly like that!"

"That settles it then!" Lucas thumps his palm on the table, almost knocking over their figurines. "Let's go where he doesn't expect. At least in those caves we can prepare for what's coming."

Mike tries his best to keep a poker face, but he's just not very good at that. The little excited glint in his eyes says that they've figured it out; they're on the right track. Will can feel a big grin starting to spread over his face.

"What are you smiling about?" Mike says, nudging him. "We still have

to traverse the caves then. Anything could be creeping in there. You sure you want to risk it?"

Will returns the look with a confidence that he'd never muster outside of this basement. "Yep."

With a "Hell yes!" and "We can make it." the other two join in.

Mike nods approvingly. "Okay then. On we go."

It doesn't get easier, but now they are on a roll, and nothing can really harm them anymore. They clear chamber after chamber, teamworking their way through without much trouble. Even so, Dustin throws Will uneasy glances a few times, and he knows why. It's something about the way their dungeon master is acting and narrating. They both have the same feeling; that something big is coming up. Mike always does something big, and it usually ends badly.

Then they enter a big cave, with nothing in it, and the alarm bells immediately start to chime. On cue, Mike is starting to get really cryptic; talking of ominous noises in the dark. It just about freaks both of them out.

Will can't sit still anymore. "What is it?!"

"What if it's the Demogorgon?" Dustin shifts uneasily. "Oh Jesus, we're so screwed if it's the Demogorgon."

Lucas rolls his eyes. "It's not the Demogorgon."

Then Mike slams a figurine on the board: "An army of troglodytes charge into the chamber!"

You can practically feel the relief around the table. They've had troglodytes before. Nothing they can't handle.

True to form, Mike cuts the relief short immediately. "But wait a minute. Did you hear that?" He's speaking softly, voice low; like he's afraid of what is coming. That it could hear him. "That sound. Boom. Boom. *Boom*. That- that didn't come from the troglodytes. No, that came from something else..."

Mike pauses for a long time, letting his eyes travel over all of them, letting the tension build. He's always had a tendency for dramatics. Will knows the trick, but he still can't help but be enthralled by it. Or maybe it's in part the dungeon master he's enthralled by. It doesn't really matter; like everyone else, he's on the edge of his seat, breathlessly waiting for what's going to happen next.

Finally, Mike gives away the game – and slams a new figurine onto the board.

"The Demogorgon!"